

Water policy forecasts Love, hate and fear

ALL that formulating good water policy for California requires is understanding and protecting a river-estuary-ay ecosystem, maneuvering within the century-old thicket of water rights law, and de-

signing and operating dams and canals, while balancing the needs and desires of farmers, city residents, businesses and environmentalists for irrigation, clean drinking water, a dependable supply and a healthy population of fish and fowl.

Editorial

*the opinion
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The latest attempt to pull this off comes from a working group known as CALFED. It's a heartening example of cooperation among formerly warring parties, but CALFED needs to think more innovatively about changing a water-the-fields system to match the state's 21st century high-tech, urban economy.

CALFED is a group in which state and federal agencies are meeting to coordinate the operations of the two giant water systems, one state and one federal, that take water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta and send it around the state.

It is also a forum in which contending interest groups — environmental, urban and agricultural —

are trying to modify the water system. The current operation is damaging the delta ecosystem, particularly fish populations. As California continues to grow and use more water, the supply might not be adequate. And the quality of the drinking water that comes from the delta is less than optimal.

CALFED has released a preliminary proposal that invites further public discussion on three options. Simplified, they are: change the way water is pumped from the delta and add protections for fish; or, enlarge certain channels through the delta; or, build a canal around the delta. Or, do some of each. All three alternatives have an option of building more reservoirs. Many environmental re-

storation projects are occurring simultaneously as well.

Common to all plans are certain elements, including conservation, ecosystem restoration, water quality improvements and water transfers.

In the words of one federal regulator, "There is something in this plan for everyone to love, for everyone to hate and for everyone to fear." One of the reasons that is true is because everything on the California water solutions menu is in this plan. So it is difficult to

know what to make of it.

The essential debate should concern whether California is going to fundamentally change the way water is used, or whether it will just try to build more facilities to do more of what we're doing now. And that question boils down to whether we're going to continue to have a system in which agriculture uses 80 percent of the water.

Change is needed, to preserve the environment and to build the state's economy. A 10 percent reduction in agricultural use would yield a 40 percent increase in the municipal-industrial supply.

Already, the environment is getting more attention, though not all it needs. More money for habitat restoration and changes in pumping operations promise to diminish the damage done by sucking water from the delta.

Next, in our view, it is premature to talk about major new facilities until water conservation and marketing have been vigorously pursued. Their potential has hardly been tapped.

If conservation were rigorously

implemented everywhere, or if farmers could readily sell the water they conserve, how great would the need be to store more water in new reservoirs? Given that the CALFED proposal contemplates at least \$4 billion worth of new facilities, we need assurance that the system uses water, and money, efficiently.

But — and we said nothing was simple here — water marketing and conservation might do little to improve another of our concerns, the quality of drinking water from the delta. Delta water makes up at least part of the drinking water for 22 million Californians, including most of Santa Clara County.

Delta water contains salts, called bromides, from sea water, and organic matter. The water, once treated, is safe to drink. On the other hand, there's a reason beer companies don't brag that they get their water from deltas. New stricter federal drinking water standards will pose an even greater challenge to water districts treating delta water.

Nothing about water has ever been easy in California; that hasn't changed. But California has changed astonishingly over the last 100 years, and the thinking about water has to change with it.